

Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, Issue #180, November 26, 2016.  
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## **“STRENGTHENING” ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES: A NEOLIBERAL RECONSTRUCTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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This paper reviews neoliberalism as an ideology that has influenced higher education generally and Ontario higher education in particular. It includes a discourse analysis of *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2012), a government discussion paper developed to focus roundtable conversations on the future of higher education in the province. The analysis reveals that, by framing higher education around such market values as competition, productivity, private interest, and profit, the discussion paper supports the government in its continuing efforts to construct, normalize, and advance a neoliberal vision of higher education.

In 2012, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (OMTCU)\* released *Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* (hereafter *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*) a discussion paper ostensibly intended to strengthen higher education. Divided into four parts, the discussion paper (1) introduces the province's post-secondary sector, notes what the author(s) take to be its track record, and sets a vision for the future; (2) reviews the financial and global context in which “transformation” of higher education will occur, with particular attention to managing costs and aligning higher education with a global trend towards technology-assisted learning, outcome-based credentials, increased student mobility, experiential learning, and new data and accountability measures; (3) provides discussion points and questions that align with the document's review of the financial and global

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\* The ministry changed its name to the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development in June 2016.

context; and (4) concludes by reaffirming the need for a transformative strategy to promote innovation, productivity, fluidity, workplace partnerships, and quality measures in higher education, and by inviting the post-secondary education (PSE) community to engage in round-table discussions and provide written submissions to the OMTCU. *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* is an important document to examine because it lays out a plan to “apply the vision for postsecondary education in Ontario, as articulated by our government, to the issue of sector transformation” (p. 6), which is further developed in the consultation and policy documents that followed.

This paper analyzes *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* to assess the extent to which the Ontario government has embraced neoliberalism and marketization as hegemonic discourses to define and shape the future of higher education. To do this, the paper is divided into five sections. Section one provides an overview of the key tenets of neoliberalism and outlines fundamental differences between neoliberalism and classical liberalism. Section two explores how neoliberalism has transformed higher education through, for example, commodification of education, transformation of the student-teacher relationship, reframing of students as consumers and faculty as traditional workers, and adoption of managerial values. Section three introduces the discourse of a “knowledge economy” and knowledge capitalism and notes how this discourse has contributed to revaluation and reconfiguration of higher education’s societal purpose. Section four reviews the vocationalization of higher education and redefinition of the student as *homo economicus*, and section five discusses accountability, quality, and performance standards as they have come to be reconceptualised in current neoliberal discourse.

## **Neoliberalism**

Over the last 30 years, neoliberalism has become the dominant economic discourse and philosophy in world economic relations. Politically imposed, it now represents the hegemonic discourse in most of the western world (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saunders, 2010; Haque, 2002). In the United States, neoliberalism has revitalized, intensified, and expanded the ambit of classical liberalism with regard to social and economic policy (Saunders, 2010). Specifically, it has supplanted the welfare liberal mode that upheld “fundamentally different premises at the level of political and economic theory, as well as at the level of philosophical assumption” (p. 314). Olssen (2000) traces the welfare mode of liberalism to John Stuart Mill, who articulated an “ethical” qualification to classical liberalism in response to the inequitable conditions of the mid-nineteenth century competitive society. For Mill, this “ethical liberalism” entailed a role for the state in increasing the possibility of *self-development*. An “ethical” view of liberalism argues for an extension of the state based on its potential for self-determining freedom and equality. Olssen refers to Ruth Jonathan (1997) who offers a contemporary articulation of “ethical” liberalism that is “impressive from the standpoint of educational inquiry . . . [since it] provides a philosophical critique of the New Right reforms in education under Thatcherism and a defence of public provision of education” (p. 494).

In his critical evaluation of Jonathan’s overview of the New Right’s rise, Olssen (2000) argues that the advent of neoliberalism must be explained within the context of the contradictions of the capitalist economy and the welfare state economy. For Olssen, Jonathan’s assertion that “the state’s *retreat* from regulation represented a populist demand for a reduction of bureaucracy, an increase in democracy and a renewed concern with the rights of the individual” (p. 505) does not constitute a suitable explanation of the “*transition of the welfare state to the free market*” (p.

504). For Olssen, neoliberal restructuring constitutes a specific reaction of “the state to the changing conditions of accumulation in the interests of certain privileged sections of the community: capital” (p. 504). This has become prevalent due to new forms of globalization or the wider post-fordist diversification of the economy. Neoliberalism has acted “as an organizational ideology to which global business corporations, global banks, and international political agencies are exercising systematic power over markets, firms, and states, [and] shaping consumption patterns” (p. 505). Olssen notes that these structural forces must be recognized for their ability to reinforce economic free market ideologies, and to control “access to and governance of traditionally autonomous services such as education” (p. 505).

Neoliberalism, therefore, has revived a key tenet of classical liberalism, namely economic liberalism. Both classical and neoliberalism share a view of the individual as a *self-interested economic subject* who is the best arbiter of his or her needs; a belief in *free market economics* as the most efficient and morally superior way to apportion resources and opportunity; a commitment to *laissez faire* or limited state intervention in or regulation of the market; and a commitment to *free trade* (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The dominance of neoliberalism is apparent in the extension of economic rationality beyond the economic sphere into the social sphere. As Saunders (2010) argues, in “the neoliberal world, there is no longer a distinction between the market and the state, between public and private, and between the individual and the social” (pp. 44–45). Through neoliberalism’s core beliefs in the supremacy of the free market, in limited state intervention or regulation, and in the individual as a rational economic agent, one encounters a redefinition of both society and the role of the state. Economic rationality reframes society and social relations as deeply *grounded in the economy*, as opposed to the other way around. As Saunders (2010) explains, “. . . expansion of the market results in the commodification and

marketization of not only goods, services, and labor, but also culture, relationships, and social institutions (such as schools and prisons)” (pp. 46–47). In the neoliberal present, a clear delineation no longer exists between society and the economy as everything becomes increasingly defined and valued in economic terms.

Despite the similarities of classical and neoliberal discourses, careful examination of their differences highlights distinguishing features. Olssen (2016) draws from Foucault to underline one significant distinction, the conception of state power. In contrast to classical liberalism, which advances a negative perception of state power and state intervention, something from which the individual should be freed, neoliberalism accommodates a positive perception of the state and recognizes the state’s role in providing conditions that support the market, through the establishment, for example, of the laws and institutions that favour the market. Although it is commonly assumed that the state’s power has been weakened due to marketization, privatization, and redefinition of state functions, the opposite holds true. Specifically, current redefinition of the state’s function does not necessarily entail a reduction in its power, but rather, “as its former functions are redefined, the state remains strong, though the use of its power is now channelled in different ways using a different logic: economic rationality” (Saunders, 2010, p. 47). Within this view, the power of the state should be redirected toward “facilitating the operation of the market and securing the ability of individuals to operate freely within it” (p. 47). While according to classical liberalism, the individual is simply autonomous and accordingly exercises his or her freedom, neoliberalism recognizes a state role in creating “an individual that is an enterprising and creative entrepreneur” (Olssen, 2016, p. 130). The attainment of neoliberal aims thus necessitates a powerful state.

A neoliberal economic logic deems social programs such as publicly funded health care and welfare as economically irrational, and thus requires their abolition. From a neoliberal perspective, continued existence of universal welfare suggests an incentive for laziness or idleness, and consequently it is believed that the state should institute “new forms of surveillance, performance appraisal and accountability, and ever more vigilant forms of monitoring and control” (Olssen, 2016, p. 130). Furthermore, a key precept of neoliberalism involves undermining of the notion of the public good, since public good models of governance are considered best eliminated in favour of individualized incentives and performance targets that signal more rigid forms of accountability and monitoring (Olssen, 2016).

### **Marketization and Neoliberalization of Higher Education**

Since the 1980s, proponents of the marketization agenda have sought to transform higher education, and, in pursuit of this agenda, governments are steering “public” universities toward implementing commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting, and management organization. For example, governments are increasingly requiring them to adopt commercial mechanisms in order to receive state funding to safeguard themselves from competitive perils (Levidow, 2007).

The advent of the New Right and its neoliberal agenda has had pervasive implications for public services as governments have promoted policies that seek to transfer an increasing proportion of the cost of education, as well as other public services, to the individual—who is viewed as a service “user.” The neoliberal approach to governance favours privatization of public services such as education so that students are required to purchase them at prices approaching market value, as opposed to having them offered by the state substantially at public

cost. As justification for a neoliberal agenda in higher education, public and policy discourses have normalized the perspective that education simply constitutes another market commodity (Lynch, 2006). Levidow (2001) identifies the neoliberal schemes for higher education as follows:

- Marketization is justified as an imperative self-defence mechanism that deals with all relevant constituencies in terms of business relationships.
- Educational efficiency, accountability, and quality are redefined in market terms.
- Courses are recast as instructional commodities.
- Student-teacher relationships are mediated by consumption and production of things. (p. 238)

Application of neoliberal policies and economic rationalities to making decisions has transformed the university to be increasingly governed as a traditional business, and so faculty are regarded as traditional workers, while students are viewed as customers (Saunders, 2010). Identification of these changes does not imply that commercialization of higher education represents a recent development (Lynch, 2006). One can see examples of university commercialization as far back as the Second World War when an open and intentional commercialization of the sciences took place, particularly in the United States, and particularly during the Second World War and Cold War. In the United Kingdom, reforms instituted after the Robins report in 1963 resulted in a change in working conditions of academics and a decline in staff employed by universities in the 1970s (Lynch, 2006). In Canada, the commercialization of knowledge, as well as the emphasis on relationships between universities and industry is long established. As early as the late 1980s, Canadian governments have matched private sector support in research as a policy tool to direct universities to undertake “industrially relevant” research activities (Chan & Fisher, 2008). Despite its existence in the previous century, the commercialization in higher education during the 21st century differs in terms of its

pervasiveness and “its pace, intensity, and moral legitimacy” (Lynch, 2006, p. 2). Lynch notes that such “commercialization is [now] normalised and its operational values and purposes have been encoded in the systems of all types of universities” (p. 2).

A number of scholars contrast the neoliberal university, which seeks to fulfil market needs, particularly in technical education and job training, and thus to generate revenue, with an earlier university paradigm that sought civic engagement, democratic education, and learning for its own sake (Saunders, 2010). Saunders (2010) agrees to some degree that universities are being vocationalized due to policies embedded in economic rationality, although “the claim that universities were ever . . . democratic institutions with altruistic aims is questionable” (p. 55). He insists persuasively, however, that “what is new to the neoliberal university is the scope and extent of these profit-driven, corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace these capitalistic goals and priorities” (p. 55). In addition, universities are increasingly expected to produce commercially oriented rather than public-interest oriented professionals. Lynch (2006) argues “the danger with this advancing market individualism is that it will further weaken public interest values among those who are university educated” (p. 2).

### *The Marketization of Higher Education in Ontario*

The market environment in Canadian higher education does not constitute an entirely competitive one and in fact may be more accurately described as a quasi-market, or what Burke (2005) refers to as a managed market, in which governments play a steering role by providing universities with incentives intended to increase their capacity to respond to market demands and opportunities. Additionally, governments play a policy role in establishing priorities for



universities, a role they are currently using to promote public–private partnerships. Following contemporary neoliberal market theory, discourse around accountability shifts to outcomes in addition to outputs.

A more market-oriented ideological approach in Canadian higher education fundamentally alters the theoretical grounding of policy with regard to benefits, beneficiaries, and benefactors of further education (Kirby, 2012). Marketization subordinates academic-humanist and citizenship values to market instruments such as competition, private interest, and profit—or simply substitutes market instruments for such values (Kirby, 2012). In addition, policymakers, administrators, politicians, and members of the public with strategic policy influence increasingly view higher education in Canada as a means “for securing national or regional economic objectives, such as increasing . . . economic efficiency, training more productive workers, and facilitating business innovation” (Kirby, 2012, p. 44). With wide adoption of the mantra of “knowledge society” as a vehicle for expanded economic development comes redefinition of higher education as valuable commodity. Increasing expectation that “public” higher institutions fulfill the needs of private, global capital has paralleled an enhanced role for private institutions, both profit and non-profit, as well as growth in private-sector activities by publically governed institutions that still continue to be funded publicly to varying degrees (Kirby, 2012). Legislation and other policy mechanisms have been used to direct Canadian universities to be “centres of capital accumulation through the commercialization of research, an increase in technology transfer and the production of intellectual property, and a weakening of the boundary between the academy and industry” (Chan & Fisher, 2008, p. 1). Chan and Fisher posit that the “relationships between the academy and industry now constitute a new academic culture for universities” (p. 1).

This increasingly market-oriented perspective on higher education is strikingly evident in *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*, produced by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (OMTCU) in 2012. This discussion paper adopts and endorses the above-mentioned changes in higher education, without actually making direct reference to either marketization or neoliberalism. For example, it states that

postsecondary education (PSE) systems around the world are rapidly transforming in response to evolving economic, social, and student learning realities. A number of factors are converging to bring about this reconfiguration of higher learning: economies are adjusting to heightened competition and to increased labour market demand for greater levels of knowledge and skills; increasingly diverse and mobile learners are expecting ever-increasingly high quality in return for what they pay; and the broader public is looking for concrete results from the investment of scarce public resources. (OMTCU, 2012, p. 4)

The discussion paper, presents a market-oriented and neoliberal view of higher education. For example, it advances a vision for higher education in which

Ontario’s colleges and universities will drive creativity, innovation, knowledge, and community engagement through teaching and research. They will put students first by providing the best possible learning experience for all qualified learners in an affordable and financially sustainable way, ensuring high quality, and globally competitive outcomes for students and Ontario’s creative economy. (OMTCU, 2012, p. 7).

These excerpts reinforce a marketization discourse in which higher education must be more efficient and serve national (and, of course, provincial) economic needs in a globalized and competitive economy. In addition, these statements discursively frame students’ identities as paying consumers. Education is a commodity and students are future economic actors with high expectations for the educational products they purchase.

The above quotations allude to the importance of knowledge to the economy. In outlining the changing role of higher education, the discussion paper constructs a reality in which “economies are adjusting to heightened economic competition and to increased market labour

demand for greater levels of knowledge and skills” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 4). Although the second excerpt makes reference to a “creative economy” rather than a “knowledge economy,” the two notions of economy may be viewed as intrinsically related as they both conceptualize universities as driving “creativity, innovation, and knowledge” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 7). The fact that this document reinforces neoliberal notions of a “knowledge economy” is more than apparent in the reference to knowledge in its title.

### **The Knowledge Economy and Knowledge as Human Capital**

Ascendancy of the view that knowledge is primarily, if not exclusively, intellectual capital of direct value in the market economy represents an important element of 21st-century neoliberalism. The term “knowledge capitalism” has surfaced recently to encapsulate this purported “knowledge economy,” an economy that, in the view of its advocates, encompasses “the economics of abundance, the annihilation of distance, the de-territorialisation of the state, and investment in human capital” (Roberts & Peters, 2008, p. 18). Olssen and Peters (2005) and Roberts and Peters (2008) refer to Burton-Jones (1999) who offers a comprehensive model of knowledge capitalism and its implications for education. Olssen and Peters (2005) quote Burton-Jones to note “among the various factors currently causing change in the economy, none is more important than the changing role of *knowledge* . . . [which] is fast becoming the most important form of global capital—hence ‘knowledge capitalism’” (p. 338). They argue that it is not just the changing role of knowledge that is at stake, but who gets to define and delimit what constitutes “knowledge” in post-secondary education in technologically advanced societies.

According to Burton-Jones’ thesis, the changing nature and value of knowledge is fundamentally transforming the foundation of economic activity, requiring a reconfiguration of

“many of our industrial era notions of business organization, business ownership, work arrangements, business strategy, and the links between education, learning, and work” (quoted in Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 238). For Burton-Jones, advanced economies obscure the delineation between manager and worker, and learner and worker, as we evolve into owners of our own intellectual capital, or, in other words, knowledge capitalists. This move toward a knowledge economy, according to Burton-Jones (quoted in Olssen & Peters, 2005), will result in the decline of traditional forms of work and “economic demand for an increasingly skilled workforce that will necessitate the move to lifelong learning” (p. 238). Burton-Jones argues that the state will serve an important function in guiding transition to a knowledge economy by concentrating on knowledge acquisition (education, learning, skills formation) and knowledge development (research, innovation) (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Policy analysts for the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) note that a knowledge economy entails critical re-evaluation of the traditional relationship among education, learning, and work and emphasize a need for partnerships between education and business. As Roberts and Peters (2008) note, reference to the “knowledge economy” and “knowledge capitalism” can be found in a number of their policy reports. These reports reframe education as a heavily undervalued form of knowledge capital that will decide the future of work, the organization of knowledge institutions, and the future configuration of society (Roberts & Peters, 2008). Roberts and Peters (2008) quote *The Knowledge-Based Economy*, a 1996 OECD report that commences with the following:

The growing codification of knowledge and its transmission through communications and technology networks had led to the emerging “information society.” The need for workers to require a range of skills and to continuously adapt these skills underlies “the learning economy.” The importance of knowledge and technology diffusion requires better understanding of knowledge networks and “national innovation systems.” (pp. 19–20)

The report promotes knowledge distribution and knowledge investments as crucial factors to economic performance and it predicts the further re-valorization of knowledge with the advent of the “information society.”

As noted by Roberts and Peters (2008), the OECD report also advocates replacing linear models of innovation with an interactive model comprised of “knowledge flows and relationships among industry, government and academia in the development of science and technology.” Due to a perceived economic need for highly skilled knowledge workers, the OECD report states that

governments will need more stress on upgrading human capital through promoting access to a range of skills, including the capacity to learn; enhancing the knowledge distribution of the power of the economy through collaborative networks and the diffusion of technology; and providing the enabling conditions of organisational change at the firm level to maximize the benefits of technology for productivity. (quoted in Roberts & Peters, 2008, p. 20)

Roberts and Peters (2008) observe that the OECD report views the “science system” especially public research laboratories and institutions of higher education, as an integral component of the knowledge economy. Additionally, it views as a significant challenge the reconciliation of traditional roles of knowledge production and training of scientists with a more recent role, that of working with industry for the transmission of knowledge and technology (Roberts & Peters, 2008, p. 20).

*Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* reveals that the Ontario ministry has accepted the notion of a “[mainly technological and scientific] knowledge economy” and the role of higher education, referred to as “centres of creativity, innovation and knowledge,” in meeting the various agendas and demands of such an economy. In its overview of Ontario’s post-secondary sector, the ministry concludes that “Ontario’s 20 publicly assisted universities contribute to the

development of Ontario’s innovation economy through the education of a highly skilled workforce to meet labour market needs and research and development (R & D) activity and commercialization” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 4). Throughout the discussion paper, the authors address and embrace higher education’s dual function of upgrading human capital and meeting the research or knowledge needs of industry as envisioned in a knowledge-type economy.

*Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* advocates reconfiguration of traditional links among business, work, and education, as well as closer collaboration among academia, government, and industry, just as the OECD reports of the 1990s do. It also suggests that a “persistent lag” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 21) in Ontario’s economy may be addressed by further development of entrepreneurial higher education and that entrepreneurial education may be enhanced through, “work with institutions to create better links and build relationships with employers, investors, and community partners to increase opportunities for experiential learning” (p. 21). Additionally, the discussion paper features a number of experiential and entrepreneurial learning facilities that have been established in collaboration with private industry. In keeping with its neoliberal view, the discussion paper posits cooperation between higher education and industry as an effective means to develop forms of knowledge or skills that the authors identify as “human capital”—itself a deeply contested term (cf. Blaug, 1968).

### *The Vocationalization of Education and the Student as Homo Economicus*

The authors of *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* view higher education essentially as an apparatus to develop highly skilled workers. Although, in the past, *one* important goal of higher education was to produce the next generation of workers, what universities were charged with producing was far less limited to economically marketable technical, scientific, and

professional knowledge and skills than in the current “knowledge worker” usage and connotations. As universities are increasingly required to meet economic aims, there has been an effort to rationalize the advantages of higher education according to economic criteria at the expense of what has typically been associated with a liberal education. In the corporatized university, the ideals of liberal education are no longer viewed as adequate to preparing students for the workforce, and, as a result, governments and university administrators have redirected funding from arts-related disciplines toward business, engineering, and applied sciences to further commercial aims (Brownlee, 2015). When programs such as the humanities, intended to educate students as responsible citizens (rather than consumers), are eliminated or marginalized, it fundamentally redefines what it means to be an “educated person.” Reflecting this, Hyslop-Margison and Leonard (2012) argue for a humanities education on the basis that democracies need citizens who can “think, judge, and criticize” (p. 8) for themselves. From their perspective, university education must impart knowledge that extends far beyond the (potentially short term) training needs of industry.

In the present neoliberal era, higher education curriculum is unmistakably designed to meet the needs of the economy, with student development and educational outcomes increasingly narrowed to focus on career training and development (Saunders, 2010). *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* espouses curricula oriented toward high remuneration job training and career development. For instance, it proposes that higher education “must explore more opportunities for the development of entrepreneurial education” and suggests expanding “co-op and work-integrated learning options to make future Ontario students more career and job ready than ever before” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 21). Furthermore, it advocates experiential learning in the form of partnerships between public higher education institutions and private industry on the

basis that they give students the “opportunity to work together in shared space with the private sector . . . [in order to] be mentored through the process of building a company based on their own ideas and inventions” (p. 21). *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* emphasizes the role of higher education as developing skills and knowledge for economic ends reflecting the classical *homo economicus* view of education, which “defines the person to be educated in economic terms, as ‘homo economicus,’ a labour market actor whose life and purpose are determined by their economic status” (Lynch, 2006, p. 3). Similarly, Saunders (2010) asserts that the advancement of neoliberalism has redefined the individual as *homo economicus*, “a rational economic actor whose behaviours, both economic and non-economic, are determined by a cost/benefit analysis” (p. 47).

In problematizing an education that values *homo economicus* or the market actor, Lynch (2006) argues that competitive individualism is not “an immoral necessity but rather a desirable and necessary attribute for a constantly reinventing entrepreneur” (p. 3). According to Lynch, neoliberalism has accomplished what classical liberalism did not, the trivialization and subordination of the kinds of education that have no market value (p. 4).

### *The Student as Consumer*

Neoliberal policies have effectively transformed students within higher education from students to customers. Although students in North America have always “purchased” their education to some extent, they maintained their primary identity as learner—distinct from and not secondary to their identity as consumer. However, under neoliberal discourses, education has increasingly been commodified and defined with reference to an economic exchange between students and higher education institutions (Saunders, 2010). The redefinition of students as



educational consumers, who possess roles, rights, and obligations analogous to those of private customers in the market place, has altered “the way that universities relate to their ‘students,’ as well as the ways in which students view learning, knowledge production and their relationship to the university” (Brownlee, 2015, p. 78). From the outset, *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* frames students as customers who are “increasingly diverse and mobile learners [and who] are expecting ever-increasingly high quality in return for what they pay” (OMTCU, p. 4). The open pursuit of commercialization has produced a profound cultural shift whereby students are strictly guided by economic self-interest, career skills, and credential acquisition (Lynch, 2006).

*Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* valorizes a system of higher education grounded in a consumer culture that promotes acquisition of credentials and career skills rather than academic rigor. It proposes a higher education system that supports a “flexible degree structure that provide[s] new learning options made possible by advancements in technology; [and] developing revitalized, labour-market-focused three-year degrees that could include specific experiential learning opportunities” (OMTCU, 2012, p. 15). The discussion paper promotes a market-driven university that responds to consumer demands as identified by business. Molseworth, Nixon, and Scallion (2009) argue “the current market discourse promotes a mode of existence where students seek to “*have* a degree” rather than “*be* learners” (p. 278). These proposals highlight the commodification of education, as a degree is conceptualized as something one attains to enter the labour market, rather than, at least in considerable part, to develop and enrich a sense of self. Furthermore, the discussion paper upholds a higher education system characterized mainly by consumer culture and credentialism:

Offering year round learning options could increase choice and allow students to earn their credentials sooner, which could result in decreased PSE-related costs. Year round learning could add to the mix of employment options available to

students by letting them work when they want—summer, fall, or winter. (OMTCU, 2012, p. 17)

Throughout the discussion paper, the OMTCU defines students primarily as consumers, as it offers increased choice with regard to the length, format, and nature of their credential. Molesworth et al. (2009) note that the market orientation of higher education “has reduced the degree to an outlay that appears to secure future material affluence rather than an investment in the self” (p. 280). According to Molesworth et al. (2009), the commodification of education “results in having a qualification without the satisfaction derived from mastering skills or the associated potential for personal change” (p. 280). The view of education as a commodity that can simply be “bought” thus reduces “to just one round of consumer desire in an endless series of consumption experiences” (p. 280).

### **Accountability, Quality, and Performance Standards**

The rhetoric of “accountability” and “quality” figure prominently in *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge*, which claims accountability is “critical” for the quality of teaching, learning and research, and that innovation (for productivity) “demands new data and accountability measures” (p. 13). As constructed in the discussion paper, quality can be assessed using outcome measures that judge the competencies and skill levels that “institutions develop in their graduates” (p. 13). Attention is drawn to the possibility that future international measures of “quality learning” will be developed that use a standardized learning assessment tool to measure critical thinking (p. 13). The discussion paper references Europe’s Tuning Project, which it notes was established to develop discipline-specific competencies that “promote mobility, credit

transfer, and credential recognition” (p. 13). This, it infers, will be part of the “new data” that innovation demands.

The discourse in *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* promotes a neoliberal conception of accountability in which *quality learning* is reduced to developing competencies and skills required for the acquisition of credentials, and quality teaching is judged not by campus professionals but by provincial policymakers who make their assessment on the basis of standardized data and outcome measures. Under “quality teaching and learning outcomes,” the discussion paper suggests exploring “more widespread implementation of . . . assessment tools to measure the achievement of desired learning outcomes and skills” as well as developing benchmarks and key performance indicators to measure “growth in outcome based learning” (p. 18). By focussing the discussion of accountability on measurable outcomes, benchmarks, and productivity, the government has changed learning objectives and normative standards of accountability to comply with those of business. This refocusing has largely directed attention away from such previously established democratic standards as equality and representation, welfare and justice, ascertaining citizens’ entitlements, and addressing public needs and demands (Haque, 2002). For example, there is no mention of the objectives and norms of governance that have emerged in advanced democracies, “the maintenance of values such as impartiality, equality, representation, integrity, fairness, welfare, citizenship, and justice” (p. 601). As Haque notes, changes in the values and objectives of governance to reflect “entrepreneurial management” have required a corresponding change to standards of accountability away from substantive public problems (like representation and poverty). Neoliberal discourse has overemphasized economic criteria as public organizations are increasingly held accountable for,

“accelerating economic growth rate, boosting efficiency and productivity, encouraging competition, maximizing profit, and ascertaining cost effectiveness” (p. 601).

*Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* includes two questions that frame the quality teaching and learning outcomes discussion: “What are the competencies that you expect graduates of our institutions to have and how do you measure whether they have been acquired? How heavy a weight could learning outcomes have in a renewed funding formula?” (p. 18). In addition to reducing quality teaching and learning to measurable outcomes, these questions link outcomes to funding. Reflecting a neoliberal call for uniformity and standardization that is apparent in contemporary K–12 education, establishment of measurable outcomes moves judgments of quality away from professional expertise. Measurable outcomes or performance standards provide a way to audit higher education. Hoecht (2006) observes that audits provide an impression of certainty and control in a world that has become sceptical about professionals. She notes, “Auditing plays a key role in the trust dilemma. It provides the impression of being well informed . . . it makes it appear that the agent’s performance is accessible to public scrutiny” (p. 544). Hoecht cites Power (1994) to suggest that “what is being assured is the quality of the control system rather than the quality of first order operations [like good teaching]” (p. 544). Because the audit, in the form of performance measures, gives the impression of control, it plays a role in garnering consent for a neoliberal vision of higher education.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The discourse of neoliberalism permeates *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* and the discussion paper is intended to normalize and advance such market values as competition, productivity, private interest, and profit in higher education. This discourse affirms the view that

neoliberalism recognizes the importance of the state in providing conditions that favour the market. With respect to higher education, the state promotes development of an enterprising consumer and producer/entrepreneur rather than thoughtful citizen. Increasingly, students are viewed as purchasers of education. As courses come to be regarded as instructional commodities, the student–teacher relationship becomes one of production and consumption. The discourse in government documents is normalizing a governance structure for higher education that is more like business, with faculty members viewed as traditional workers, and students as customers. Although commercialization of higher education is not new, the current pace, intensity, and moral legitimization of commercialization is. As market values become entrenched in the discourse, professors become commercially oriented rather than publicly interested professionals. Governments provide incentives for higher education to promote public–private partnerships and knowledge creation becomes concerned with meeting the research and knowledge needs of industry. Increasingly, higher education is becoming vocationalized as co-op education and entrepreneurial learning are promoted. Knowledge that has no market value becomes trivialized and attention is focused on students obtaining a credential rather than on obtaining deep understanding of complex issues. In this view, economic accountability standards replace the accountability standards of advanced democracies, and the audit, focused on control of the system, acts as a proxy for quality teaching and learning.

By controlling the talking points and discussion questions, the authors of *Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge* helped to legitimize and valorize a neoliberal discourse apparent in OMTCU consultation and policy documents that followed. Most notably perhaps is *Ontario’s Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education* (OMTCU, 2013), which “sets the foundation for broader postsecondary system transformation” (p. 6) through differentiation,

and requires each PSE institution establish a Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) identifying its key area of differentiation and metrics to demonstrate progress to provincial goals. More recently, *Focus on Outcomes, Centre on Students: Perspectives on Evolving Ontario’s University Funding Model* (OMTCU, 2015) outlines Ontario’s plan to reform the current PSE funding model from an enrolment-based model to more of an outcomes based model to help ensure “a culture of continuous improvement” (p. 44). Proposed outcomes to measure student success include employment outcomes, labour market preparedness, time-to-completion, and student satisfaction. In this way, a neoliberal “strengthening” of PSE is well underway.

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